

COINS

Cents missing copper may be collectibles

By Roger Boye

After much testing, hobby specialists have declared four zinc-colored pennies to be authentic "minting varieties" issued by Uncle Sam.

That finding should help create a wider market for 1982- and 1983-dated zinc cents that are missing their copper coatings because of sloppy work during the coin production process. At least one dealer is paying \$60 each for authentic zinc-colored cents in uncirculated condition, according to researcher Alan Herbert.

Several weeks ago, some experts suggested that a "funny penny" would never be worth more than 1 cent. Tricksters could remove the paper-thin copper plating with acids, the pros said, creating a perfect imitation of an authentic blooper coin.

Few, if any, skilled hobbyists will pay more than face value for an apparent minting variety or "error coin" unless they are certain the goof is "genuine," that is, issued by the government. But the staff of the American Numismatic Association's Certification Service, which authenticated the four pennies, says it is possible to identify a forged zinc-colored cent.

The ANACS experts applied different types of acids to normal 1982 and 1983 copper-coated zinc cents taken from circulation. The staff discovered that the acids etched into parts of the zinc core before they had eaten through the thickest areas of the copper coating, said ANACS director Kenneth E. Bressett.

The four zinc-colored coins authenticated by ANACS had no telltale signs of tampering with acids, and they also were covered with mint luster, a shine created during the minting process. Bressett said a prankster could not have duplicated the shine so perfectly.

Zinc-copper minting varieties were unknown before 1982, of course. The government switched during the last year from making Lincoln cents out of an alloy containing almost all copper to zinc plated with copper.

Error-coin expert Herbert advises hobbyists to check the design of any zinc-colored cent they own. Sharp and distinct details indicate the coin may be an authentic variety while a fuzzy design means that someone probably treated the piece with acid. He also said collectors should place zinc-colored cents in air-tight containers because zinc corrodes quickly.

Meanwhile, Jeff Bernberg, vice president of the Rare Coin Co. of America in Chicago, said he's still skeptical of 1982 and 1983 cents missing their copper plating. The company might pay \$5 for one of the coins as a speculation and then try to sell it for \$10, he added.

The company recently sold for \$10 a comparable minting variety, a quarter missing one of its clad layers.